

Arson Up 75 Percent For City in Two Years Despite Drop in Fires

By ANNA QUINDLEN

The number of fires in New York City has declined, but arson has increased more than 75 percent in the last two years and the number of deaths from arson-caused fires is continuing to rise, according to a report released yesterday by the city's Arson Strike Force.

The strike-force coordinator, John Engel, told the City Council's Committee on Public Safety that the civilian death rate in arson-caused fires so far this year had already exceeded the number of such deaths for all of 1978.

According to his report, 39 deaths have resulted from arson fires through August of this year. In 1978, a total of 37 people died in arson fires. But despite the formation of the anti-arson group last year, the number of arrests for arson has declined.

Brooklyn Is Hardest-Hit Borough

"There's no doubt that it still remains a pressing problem throughout the city," Mr. Engel said.

The strike force, which was established in 1978 after an extensive study of arson by the Council committee, is primarily federally financed. The force, which includes representatives of the Fire, Police and Housing Preservation and Development Departments, reports to the Mayor and the Council twice a year.

A comparison of fire and arson activity for the first six months of 1977, 1978 and 1979 showed that while the number of structural fires had dropped nearly 18 percent, suspicious fires had risen more than 20 percent. Brooklyn was hardest hit, with nearly 40 percent of all the city's suspicious fires recorded in that borough.

In the first six months of 1977 there were 2,015 determined arson cases. In the same period in 1978 there were 3,079 such cases and in the first six months of 1979 there were 3,872, up more than 75 percent from the six-month period of 1977. Arson arrests fell from 696 in 1977 to 657 in 1978. In the first six months of 1979 there were 238 arrests for arson.

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